Berlin Defense Tech Forum 2026

8 AUGUST 2026

Kalum Rock



Berlin Defense Tech Week 2026.

The Berlin Defense Tech Forum 2026 brought together defense startups, investors, military personnel, policymakers, and practitioners supporting Ukraine's defense efforts. One of the most valuable aspects of the event was the presence of Ukrainian soldiers and individuals directly involved in the war, whose operational experience provided a reality check for many technological concepts and assumptions about modern warfare.

The central message repeated throughout the discussions was that a promising idea does not automatically translate into a useful battlefield capability. Successful innovation must be driven by the actual needs of soldiers rather than by technological ambition alone. Startups were therefore encouraged to engage directly with Ukrainian military units, observe operational requirements firsthand, and continuously validate whether their products solve real problems under combat conditions. Several speakers

stressed that frequent feedback from frontline users should be integrated throughout the development process rather than only after a product has been completed.

A recurring theme was the importance of simplicity and affordability. Equipment deployed at the front must be inexpensive, reliable, and easy to repair or replace. Highly sophisticated solutions may perform well in controlled environments but often fail to meet the practical demands of sustained warfare. Products that are difficult to maintain or too costly to replace are unlikely to be adopted at scale. In many cases, a robust and readily available solution was considered more valuable than a technologically superior system with limited scalability.

One particularly interesting discussion focused on battlefield medicine. Unlike many other areas of defense technology, medical innovation faces unique obstacles because failures can immediately cost lives. The iterative trial-and-error approach that characterizes most startup development is difficult to apply when testing new medical equipment or procedures in combat. As a result, investment tends to concentrate on weapons systems, drones, and electronic warfare capabilities, where experimentation is considered more feasible despite the rapidly evolving threat environment. This creates a structural imbalance in defense innovation, leaving some potentially valuable medical technologies underdeveloped despite their importance on the battlefield.

The ongoing war has also created what several speakers described as an innovation arms race between Ukraine and Russia. Both sides are continuously adapting their technologies and tactics, particularly in the fields of drones, counter-drone systems, electronic warfare, and autonomous capabilities. This rapid cycle of adaptation resembles the technological competition seen during the Cold War, albeit at a much faster operational tempo. New solutions can become obsolete within months as opponents rapidly develop effective countermeasures, forcing both militaries and industry to innovate continuously.

A final takeaway concerned the implications for NATO. Several participants argued that many NATO militaries have yet to fully adapt their doctrine and training to the realities of modern warfare. While conventional infantry skills remain essential, the battlefield has become increasingly dominated by unmanned aerial systems, with drones now responsible for a significant share of casualties. Consequently, Ukrainian forces are developing an unparalleled level of practical expertise in contemporary warfare. Their experience and lessons learned are likely to become an invaluable resource for Western armed forces and defense planners long after the war has ended. Many participants therefore argued that systematically integrating Ukrainian operational knowledge into NATO training, procurement, and doctrine development should become a strategic priority.